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INFO RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 3909
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0798
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1222
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT PRIORITY 5985
RUEHLA/AMCONSUL BARCELONA PRIORITY 2310
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHRN/USMISSION UN ROME PRIORITY 0001
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0834
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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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PRM/AFR FOR MARY LANGE
NEA/MAG FOR JIM FLOWERS
ROME FOR FODAG
GENEVA FOR RMA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREF PHUM AG SP

SUBJECT: SPAIN ON SAHRAWI REFUGEE CENSUS; ALGERIA SUMMIT

REF: STATE 201212

1. (SBU) Poloff met with Spanish MFA Subdirector General for North African Affairs Manuel Gomez-Acebo and Deputy Subdirector General Javier Garcia-Larrache on December 22 to discuss pressing Algeria and the Polisario Front (PF) on allowing the UNHCR to conduct a refugee registration in the Tindouf camps (reftel). Gomez-Acebo said that any decision on whether to press Algeria on a refugee count would require additional discussions within the MFA, as it would constitute a delicate political decision. He asked Poloff whether there was a particular framework or time-frame in which the U.S. is seeking Spanish support, noting that the UNHCR Executive Committee meeting had just recently taken place. He said that the GOS would always support the consensus of the UNHCR, but Spain views it as extremely important that this assistance continue to flow. Poloff told Gomez-Acebo that he would seek further information from Washington.

¶2. (SBU) Garcia-Larrache added his opinion that there is certainly reason for concern over the management of the Sahrawi food assistance program, and he noted that Spain is in favor of verifying that the food assistance is both getting to the right people and not being provided in excess of actual need. Emboff also suggested that perhaps reluctance from Algeria and the PF is based in the knowledge that the refugee numbers could be significantly lower than currently claimed, and Garcia-Larrache agreed. He said that the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation has accepted the UNHCR number (first 90,000 and now 125,000) as the number of persons requiring food assistance without making any comment or affirmation as to whether that number is reflective of the actual number of Sahrawi refugees.

¶3. (SBU) Turning to the recent Spain-Algeria High Level Meeting, Gomez-Acebo said that the media were upset by the lack of a press conference during the summit and that this colored their reporting. Notwithstanding, the MFA considers the trip to have been a success, and Gomez-Acebo noted that the one-on-one meeting between Zapatero and Bouteflika lasted almost three hours, or two hours longer than planned. While no date has been finalized for the visit of King Juan Carlos, the two countries agreed that this would probably take place in the first quarter of 2007.

//COMMENT//

¶4. (SBU) On the heels of President Zapatero's visit to Algeria, which was roundly dismissed as a failure in Spanish media, the GOS may be wary of appearing in any way hostile toward Algeria or the Polisario Front, either in terms of reducing food aid to Sahrawi refugees or diminishing the numerical significance of Sahrawi refugees in the Western Sahara debate. Spain's dependence on Algerian hydrocarbons is also likely to color any bilateral criticisms. A visit by King Juan Carlos to Algeria has not taken place since the 1980's; it would be a significant step in improving bilateral relations.

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